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# ERODING NORMS AND DEMOCRATIC DECONSOLIDATION

*Paul Howe*

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As far-right parties make electoral gains across many Western democracies, attention has turned to the wide-ranging implications of this troubling development. One important line of inquiry asks about the potential dangers to democracy: Are voters simply letting off steam, or are we seeing genuine threats to key democratic principles and practices? Are such pillars of democracy as respect for minority rights, the rule of law, and checks and balances on executive power at risk in some of the world's oldest democracies?

In these pages recently, Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk answered these questions in the affirmative.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on data from the World Values Survey (WVS)—including recent waves of the study that have asked about attitudes toward core democratic norms and the idea of democracy itself—they find disturbing trends in both the United States and Europe. Since 1995, support for key democratic principles has eroded, while a surprising degree of openness to nondemocratic alternatives has appeared. Disconcertingly, it is younger citizens who are most likely to express a weaker sense of attachment to democracy. Overall levels of support for democracy remain reasonably high, but the trajectory of opinion is troubling, and could portend a grim future of “democratic deconsolidation” for the United States and other established democracies.

These findings raise the question of why this change in public sentiment has been occurring. What causes, whether immediate or more

distant, are pushing many citizens to question democratic principles that once seemed so undoubted and secure?<sup>2</sup>

One common explanation holds that we are seeing the effects of widespread discontent with the operation of the democratic system. Foa and Mounk appear to work from this premise, setting the stage for their analysis by noting that “over the last three decades, trust in political institutions . . . has precipitously declined across the established democracies of North America and Western Europe.”<sup>3</sup> Among the institutions and political players coming under fire are mainstream political parties, legislatures, presidents and prime ministers, policy experts, and civil servants. Populist parties promise decisive action in the interests of the people, even if it means skirting democratic procedures and principles; disgruntled voters approve. In short, this is a political problem with a political solution: Improve the way democracy works, and public confidence in the system will return.

Yet this interpretation is flawed, or at least incomplete. Further evidence from the WVS suggests that the rise of antidemocratic sentiment has less to do with dysfunction in the political arena than with corrosive changes that have reshaped the social and cultural landscape more generally. As if “fixing” Congress, taming partisanship, neutering special interests, and devising other political remedies were not challenge enough, this analysis suggests that the problem runs deeper and will require far-reaching measures on various fronts to maintain the foundations of a democratic political culture.

Foa and Mounk focus on documenting the erosion in support for democratic norms rather than probing the origins of the problem. Their evidence is persuasive and disconcerting. Among their salient findings are the following:

- In 1995, 24 percent of U.S. respondents to the WVS felt that it would be better to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with the legislature and elections. In the 2011 wave of the study, this had climbed to 32 percent.
- In 1995, one in sixteen U.S. respondents thought that it would be good if the army ruled; by 2011, this share had grown to one in six.
- In the 2011 wave, 41 percent of the older generation (those born in the interwar and early postwar periods) felt it was “absolutely essential” in a democracy that “civil rights protect people’s liberty.” Only 32 percent of those born since 1980 (the so-called millennials) shared this view.
- In the 2006 and 2011 waves combined, 72 percent of U.S. respondents born before World War II deemed it “absolutely important” to live in a democracy. Among millennials, only 30 percent agreed.<sup>4</sup>

The general picture that Foa and Mounk present shows waning support for core democratic principles and increased openness to non-democratic forms of government. The slippage is not confined to those born since 1980: The belief that it is absolutely important to live in a democracy, for instance, declines by about ten points with each cohort, going from over 70 percent among those born in the 1930s to about 30 percent among those born in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Rather than pointing to an abrupt shift among the millennials or something specific to young adults, the pattern of linear decline suggests steady generational change over a longer period.<sup>6</sup> What may be new is that this gradual alteration in political culture has reached a critical threshold, with consequences now emerging in the real world of politics.

Foa and Mounk concentrate much of their attention on the United States. What follows here is a further look at the U.S. case to explore the origins of these worrying trends.

### **Waning Confidence in Institutions**

If the conventional wisdom is correct—if discontent with the operation of contemporary democracy is now shading assessments of democracy itself—those who lack trust in existing institutions should be the most apt to question core democratic principles.

Since the cross-national WVS began in the early 1980s, it has included questions designed to gauge confidence in public institutions. The 2011 results for the United States confirm a widely documented pattern: Faith in core institutions of government is weak. Nearly three-fifths (59 percent) of respondents say that they have “not very much” confidence in Congress, while another 20 percent say that they have “none at all.” Political parties fare worse: 66 percent of respondents have not very much confidence, 21 percent none at all. Confidence in “government in your nation’s capital” is only marginally better, as 52 percent indicate not very much, while 14 percent say none at all.

Near the start of President Ronald Reagan’s administration, Wave 1 of the WVS asked only about confidence in Congress. The erosion in trust from then to now is clear. At that time, fewer than half the respondents (47 percent) said they had not very much confidence in Congress or none at all. These results are consistent with a substantial body of literature that points to declining confidence and trust in government from roughly the late 1960s through to the present day.<sup>7</sup>

How, then, does the current dissatisfaction with government relate to sentiments about basic democratic norms and principles? Table 1 captures the pattern—or rather the lack of one, for there is but a weak and inconsistent link between low confidence in major political institutions and expressions of indifference or opposition to core democratic principles. The left-hand column of Table 1 contains the least critical

**TABLE 1—VIEWS ON DEMOCRACY  
BY CONFIDENCE IN U.S. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS\***

<i>Percentage who respond that...</i>	<i>...among respondents who...</i>	...express confidence in at least one of three institutions.	...express lack of confidence (“not very much” or “none at all”) in all three institutions.	...express lack of confidence (“none at all”) in all three institutions.
...having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is a good thing.		38%	32%	34%
...having the army rule is a good thing.		21%	15%	17%
...people choosing their leaders in free elections is an essential characteristic of democracy.		54%	58%	45%
...civil rights protecting people’s liberty from state oppression is an essential characteristic of democracy.		35%	33%	27%
...[it is] absolutely important to live in a country that is governed democratically.		51%	47%	43%
Sample Size (N)		(775)	(1115)	(215)

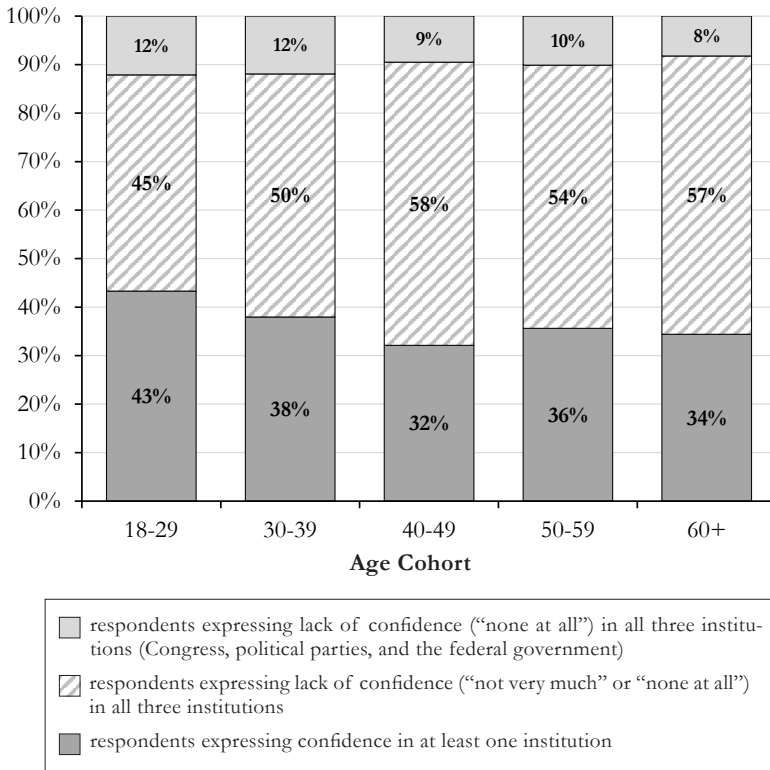
\*Respondents were surveyed specifically on Congress, political parties, and the federal government.

Source: World Values Survey, Wave 6 (2011); United States respondents only.

group from the 2011 U.S. WVS, the slightly more than a third of all respondents who voice “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of confidence in at least one of the following: Congress, political parties, or the federal government. In the middle column is a more critical group (just over half) who express scant confidence (either “not very much” or “none at all”) in each of the three institutions. And in the right-hand column are the remaining respondents, roughly a tenth of the total, who avow zero confidence (“none at all”) in all three institutions.

The differences across the three groups in Table 1 are relatively muted. Similar percentages (38, 32, and 34) say that it would be a good idea to have a political system with “a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.” When it comes to believing army rule “a good thing,” the percentages are 21, 15, and 17. In both instances, citizens who express confidence in at least one political institution are actually more likely than other respondents to endorse the undemocratic option, though the differences are small.

For the other three questions concerning democratic norms, critical citizens do express lower support, but the effects remain weak. The most adamant critics of Congress, parties, and government are slightly less likely to offer their unconditional support for the principles of free elections, civil rights, and democracy as a whole. Yet the gaps separating inveterate critics and the group expressing the greatest confidence in institutions are only in the order of seven to nine percentage points. Meanwhile, differences between this supportive group and more moderate critics in the

**FIGURE 1—CONFIDENCE IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS BY AGE COHORT**

Source: World Values Survey, Wave 6 (2011); United States respondents only. Valid sample size in each age group ranges from 358 to 535.

middle column are minimal and inconsistent. None of these data points provides any compelling evidence that skepticism about basic democratic norms is emanating primarily from the ranks of the politically disaffected.

If Table 1 casts doubt on the assumption that erosion in democratic support must be connected to rising discontent with political institutions, so too does Figure 1, which traces confidence in core institutions across age groups. Given Foa and Mounk’s finding that younger generations are more apt to question basic democratic norms, the prevailing wisdom would lead us to expect that younger people will express lower levels of confidence in institutions. Yet again the anticipated pattern fails to appear. Those under age 30 are actually a bit more likely than other age groups to indicate confidence in at least one major political institution (43 percent) and only marginally more likely than older respondents to express no confidence “at all” in institutions across the board (12 percent). The differences here are generally slight, however, and offer no evidence of any significant generational divide in attitudes toward democratic institutions.

Clearly these numbers run counter to the common wisdom that grow-

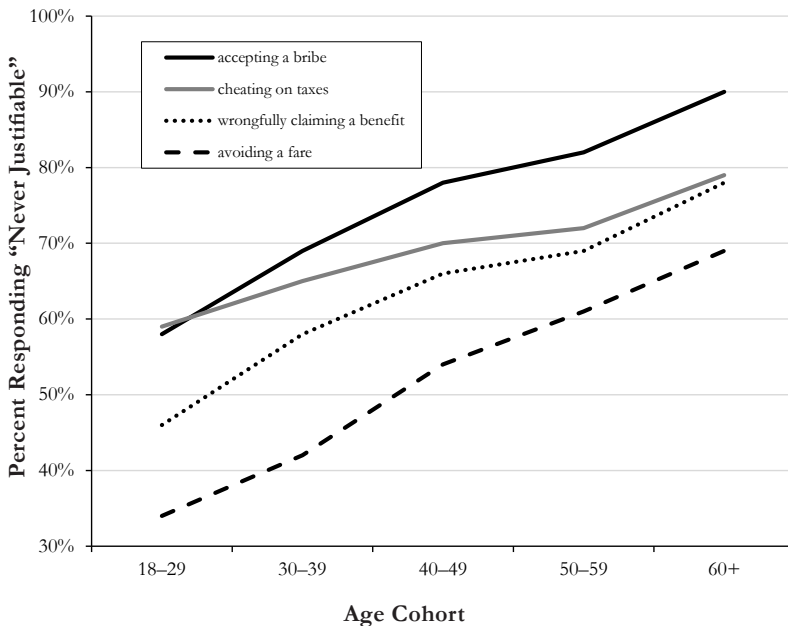
ing skepticism concerning democracy as a form of government is mainly an unfortunate consequence of dissatisfaction with the way the democratic system is currently working. The correlations of attitudes predicted by this perspective are simply not present in the WVS data for the United States. As such, the findings partly support those scholars (including Ronald Inglehart, Christian Welzel, Pippa Norris, and Russell Dalton) who take the optimistic view that the growing numbers of “critical citizens” in the Western democracies pose no threat to the democratic form of government. Though vehement and sometimes strident, these critical citizens typically remain committed democrats who, in addition to specific policy changes, simply want a more robust and responsive democracy.<sup>8</sup> Yet the optimism embodied in this perspective is missing an important part of the picture: “Critical citizens” may remain committed to democracy, but some other kinds of citizens are clearly turning away. So who, then, is repudiating democracy? What are the defining qualities of these individuals and why are their numbers growing?

### **Antisocial Attitudes**

A different set of attitudinal measures from the WVS offers insight into the wellsprings of undemocratic sentiment in the U.S. population. From the start, the surveys have probed dimensions of respondents’ moral compass on a broad range of social issues, questions that offer insight into their general regard for important social norms. The format has stayed the same across all six waves, from the early 1980s to 2011. People are asked whether certain behaviors or practices are “ever justifiable” based on a scale from 1 (“never justifiable”) to 10 (“always justifiable”). Many of these questions deal with contentious issues (abortion, divorce, premarital sex, and so on) about which views can be expected to differ. It is hard to draw conclusions about general respect for social norms based on those responses. For other items, however, there is a much clearer sense of the socially appropriate response—for example, “stealing property”—and it reveals something important about respondents when they allow that such actions may be justifiable.

A core set of the latter type of questions has appeared on the WVS since its inception in the early 1980s, and appears again in the Wave 6 study of 2011. These queries ask whether it is ever justifiable to: 1) claim government benefits to which one is not entitled; 2) take a bribe in the course of one’s duties; 3) cheat on taxes; and 4) avoid a public-transit fare. While not all equally grave, these are all unlawful acts. In every case, a majority of Wave 6 respondents say that the behavior in question is never justifiable. But as Figure 2 reveals, younger respondents are substantially less likely than older ones to respond in this principled manner. Whereas 90 percent of those over age 60 say that taking a bribe is never justifiable, only 58 percent of those under 30 concur. Similar age gaps appear across all four

**FIGURE 2—SHARE VIEWING ACTS AS UNJUSTIFIABLE BY AGE COHORT**



Source: World Values Survey, Wave 6 (2011), United States respondents only. Valid sample size in each age group ranges from 362 to 545.

measures. Furthermore, the differences extend across the full range of age categories in a linear fashion suggestive of gradual generational change, rather than a more abrupt change specific to the young adults of today.

As Table 2 shows, these same attitudes correlate closely with respondents' positions on the value and necessity of democracy. The left-hand column includes the most principled respondents, who say that none of the four unlawful acts is ever justifiable. As a group, they make up slightly less than half (46 percent) of all respondents. The middle column represents the group (another third) who say that at least one of these acts is at least somewhat justifiable (in other words, give a response greater than "1" to at least one question). The column on the right represents the remaining fifth of respondents, who say that *all four* actions are at least somewhat justifiable (i.e., give a response greater than "1" to all four questions).<sup>9</sup>

It is the latter group that truly stands apart on matters of democracy. Nearly three-fifths (59 percent) feel that it would be good to have a political system with a strong leader untroubled by elections and a legislature. Two in five look favorably on the idea of military rule. Only 22 percent feel that the free election of leaders is an essential characteristic of democracy, and a mere 12 percent believe that civil rights protecting against state oppression are essential. Not even one in five (19 percent) believes living in a democracy to be of absolute importance.



The gaps separating this group from the most principled citizens in the left-hand column are consistently large, varying from 28 to 45 percentage points. The respondents in the left-hand column (those who express the most scrupulous attitudes) are three times more likely than the least scrupulous to think it essential that leaders be freely elected in a democracy and to believe in the absolute importance of democracy; they are almost four times less likely to think military rule a good thing. The link between attitudes reflecting respect for social norms and views about the merits of democracy is strong and consistent.

How should we interpret this pattern? Is there a political explanation? Each act in question has to do with something public or governmental; is this a matter of tolerating actions meant to put one over on “the system”? If so, we would expect those expressing the most negative evaluations of government to be the most inclined to think these actions sometimes justified: Antisystem behavior becomes legitimate when the political system is seen as deeply dysfunctional. Yet this connection is not evident in the data. Among those with the least confidence in political institutions, 17 percent take the view that all four “antisystem” actions have some justification; among those with the greatest confidence in institutions, the corresponding figure is virtually identical (18 percent). The overall correlation between confidence in public institutions (government, Congress, and parties) and tolerance of the four behaviors is weak ( $r=.08$ ). Moreover, it runs in the wrong direction, as those who express the greatest confidence show the greatest incidence of tolerance for unlawful behaviors.<sup>10</sup>

Instead, attitudes concerning bribe-taking, tax evasion, and the like track closely with other WVS measures that also capture aspects of personal probity (or its absence) but clearly have no political content. In 1990, for example, the study asked about a series of behaviors that implied stark disregard for the interests of others, such as “lying in your own self-interest,” deciding to “keep lost money you have found,” “buying stolen goods,” and “failing to report damage to a parked vehicle.” The correlation between these items and the four asking about bribe-taking, tax evasion, and so forth was very robust ( $r=0.57$ ) among U.S. respondents. And the same powerful age gradient that we saw in Figure 2 was also evident for these questions: Those under 30 were 20 to 25 percentage points more likely than those over 60 to consider each of these blatantly self-interested practices at least somewhat justifiable.

Further questions from the 2011 WVS suggest that hostile and aggressive attitudes are another salient component of the antisocial mindset. These queries ask whether justification can ever be afforded for “a man to beat his wife,” for “parents beating their children,” and for “violence against other people.” Tolerance for these three behaviors is not widespread: 61 percent say all three actions are never justifiable, while just 12 percent indicate some degree of tolerance for all three forms of violence. But once again, the young are more likely to fall in the latter category (22

**TABLE 2—VIEWS ON DEMOCRACY  
BY ATTITUDES TOWARD UNLAWFUL ACTS**

<i>Percentage who respond that...</i>	<i>...among respondents who answer that...</i>	...none of the four acts is justifiable.	...at least one of the four acts is justifiable.	...all four acts are justifiable.
...having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is a good thing.		26%	35%	59%
...having the army rule is a good thing.		11%	14%	40%
...people choosing their leaders in free elections is an essential characteristic of democracy.		67%	56%	22%
...civil rights protecting people's liberty from state oppression is an essential characteristic of democracy.		40%	35%	12%
...[it is] absolutely important to live in a country that is governed democratically.		59%	47%	19%
Sample Size (N)		(982)	(744)	(397)

*Note:* Unlawful acts include: accepting a bribe, cheating on taxes, wrongfully claiming a government benefit, avoiding a fare on public transit.

*Source:* World Values Survey, Wave 6 (2011), United States respondents only.

percent of those under 30 compared to just 6 percent of those over 60). Moreover, these questions concerning the use of violence are very tightly correlated with attitudes concerning bribe-taking, tax evasion, and the rest ( $r=0.64$ ). And finally, they are also equally powerful predictors of anti-democratic attitudes. Among those who feel that all three violent behaviors are at least somewhat justifiable, 61 percent believe that it would be a good idea to have a strong leader who does not bother with parliament and elections, while 49 percent feel the same way about military rule. Only 20 percent believe in the absolute importance of democracy.

What do these various results imply? They do not suggest a direct causal link between views on any specific issue (evading taxes, buying stolen goods, or the like) and general democratic dispositions. Instead, they imply that indifferent feelings toward democracy are interlaced with a broader set of self-interested and antisocial attitudes that are present among a substantial minority of the U.S. population. They also suggest that assessments of democracy do not operate strictly on a political plane. Deeper dispositions and embedded values color more abstract political evaluations.

Prominent leaders in the populist mold offer suggestive evidence of this connection. On both sides of the Atlantic, and indeed in other parts of the globe, these political firebrands compete in the democratic process, yet with words and actions that convey disregard for core democratic principles such as the rule of law, minority rights, and checks and balances on executive power. At the same time, a number of these individuals are prone to brazen, dubious, and sometimes aggressive behaviors that suggest outsized egos, scant respect for others, and a degree of contempt

for social norms. It is reasonable to think that the disdain these individuals show for democratic principles may flow less from an assessment of institutional dysfunction (the current democratic system is so flawed that democracy's rules must be bent) than from an underlying intemperate and unprincipled mindset. The WVS results suggest that the same may be true among the public at large. In other words, a broader constellation of transgressive and antisocial attitudes among a subsection of the public is an important force behind rising disregard for democratic norms.

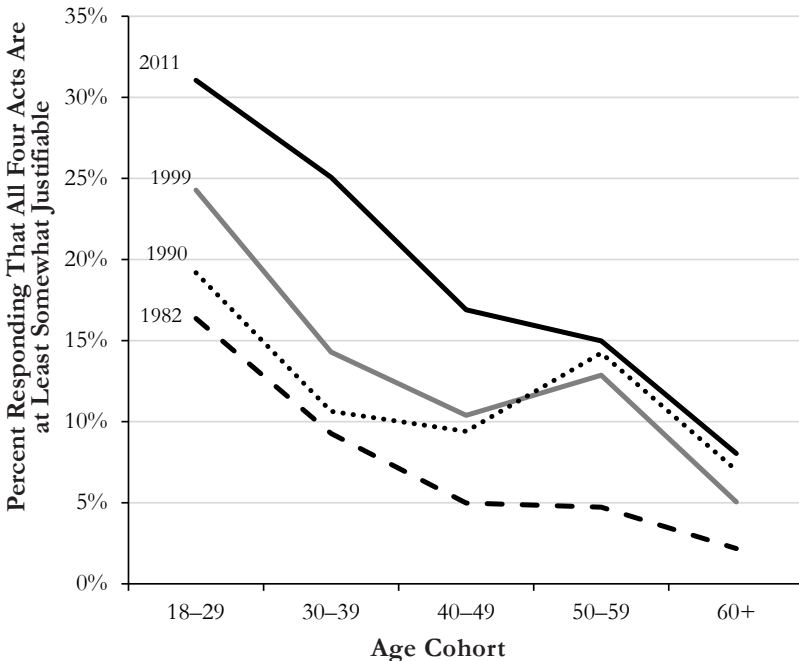
These same results, it should be added, also suggest that those who reject core tenets of democracy are not necessarily embracing authoritarianism, or at least not the kind that involves actual respect for authority. Instead, they are broadly dismissive of a wide range of social norms and tolerant of various illegal and antisocial behaviors. Indeed, they would appear to be the polar opposite of the type of people pegged as authoritarian in most recent empirical studies on the subject. That research has adopted a method of measuring authoritarianism based on questions that ask respondents about qualities they believe are important in children, with those opting for the qualities of obedience, respect for elders, good manners, and being well-behaved deemed to be strongly authoritarian.<sup>11</sup> The attitudes displayed by those who reject democracy suggest a much more tempestuous and disorderly way of thinking and acting. If it is a type of authoritarianism, it is certainly not the form that favors order and regulation above all else. The same may hold true of at least some populist leaders, whose main method and goal seem to be the disruption of the status quo rather than the creation of firm authoritarian rule. Yet danger remains, of course, since their destabilizing efforts may eventually prove to be a first step down the road toward more conventional authoritarianism.

The WVS datasets offer evidence that this troubling syndrome of attitudes reflecting broad disregard for social norms has been slowly spreading over the past few decades. Using the consistently asked questions about unlawful acts, Figure 3 shows the percentage who see some degree of justifiability in all four actions (benefit fraud, bribe-taking, tax evasion, and fare-skipping) across different age groups at roughly ten-year intervals. In 1982, 16 percent of those ages 18 to 29 fell into this category. This climbed to 19 percent by 1990, 24 percent by 1999, and 31 percent in 2011. Steady and substantial increases are apparent across other age categories as well.<sup>12</sup> As with antidemocratic attitudes, those expressing antisocial views remain a minority in every cohort. But the direction of change is worrisome. If we hope to counter it, we need to understand it better.

## **The Origins of Cultural Change**

This steady rise in antisocial dispositions can be traced to a broader evolution over the past several decades that has witnessed generationally driven change in foundational norms and values. While not political

**FIGURE 3—TOLERANCE FOR UNLAWFUL ACTS  
BY AGE COHORT, 1982–2011**



Source: World Values Survey, Waves 1, 2, 4, and 6, United States respondents only. Valid sample size ranges from 1,194 (1999) to 2,240 (1982). Valid sample size for individual age groups ranges from 171 to 764.

in origin, this development has important implications for politics, as it profoundly alters the social and cultural landscape within which political life unfolds.

There is no consensus on the exact nature or catalyst of these changes, but there are some persistent themes. Social psychologist Jean Twenge echoes the thinking of many when she proposes in her 2006 book *Generation Me* that the signal development was the emergence of a powerful ethos of individualism among young Baby Boomers in the 1960s. This mindset and way of life, she writes, became deeply embedded in the generations that followed. The new doctrine had undeniable appeal, as well as personal and social benefits. Individuals gained a greater sense of confidence, self-worth, and personal autonomy; society became more respectful of individuals and groups different from the mainstream by virtue of their social and cultural background or lifestyle choices.

Yet there were downsides as well. Social rules that served a purpose met with growing disdain, social cohesion waned, and the sense of a greater good at stake in individual behavior began to lose its purchase.<sup>13</sup> In a 2009 follow-up book, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Twenge and co-

author W. Keith Campbell concentrate on these negative consequences. They describe how parenting and schooling methods that stress the building of children's self-esteem have reinforced and inflated the individualist ethos, with help from a pervasive celebrity culture that revels in unprecedented levels of exhibitionism and self-promotion.

The result has been what Twenge and Campbell call an epidemic of personal and societal narcissism. Symptoms include a strong sense of individual entitlement in many that has contributed to a proliferation of cheating and other forms of unethical and self-aggrandizing behavior, as well as anger and disillusionment when life does not deliver the unending rewards that some have come to see as their due.<sup>14</sup> The WVS results are consistent with this assessment, for they reveal a sizeable minority, particularly among younger generations, who exhibit what might be deemed symptoms of narcissism in their consistent disregard for basic social norms and endorsement of self-interested and aggressive actions.

Also important to add is that the range of attitudes and dispositions displayed by those who are doubtful about democracy are substantially more common among less-educated sections of U.S. society. This is true for all the relevant measures considered here—including disregard for democratic norms and the expression of antisocial attitudes—and it holds across generational cohorts. Those with a high-school education or less are substantially more likely than those with a college degree to express skeptical views about democracy as well as tolerance of various antisocial behaviors, by variances that range from 5 to 30 percentage points across the questions.

Others who have explored this dimension of U.S. social evolution often propose more sympathetic interpretations for antisocial attitudes that are connected to socioeconomic status, taking the feelings of alienation and distrust common among those with limited education and poor life prospects as an entirely understandable response to the obstacles that society often throws in their way. In his 2015 book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Robert D. Putnam identifies a growing divergence in positive life outcomes between those growing up in households where parents have a high-school education or less and those growing up with parents of greater educational attainment and material affluence. Putnam also uncovers a parallel trend in social attitudes, finding, for example, that the decline in social trust over the past forty years has been especially sharp among younger generations whose parents fall toward the lower end of the schooling spectrum.

Putnam presents the divide between classes as a holistic problem in which bread-and-butter issues are closely intertwined with social values and worldviews.<sup>15</sup> It is fair to add that the individualist ethos highlighted in Twenge and Campbell's work may also be an exacerbating factor in this burgeoning socioeconomic divide—an empowering doctrine for those who have the educational and familial resources to move ahead and go after what they want in life, but disempowering and dispiriting

for those who fail to advance and have no one to blame or fall back on but themselves. In an individualistic society, the differences between classes can grow more stark both on the socioeconomic front and in the realm of social values and aspirations.

Finally, it is noteworthy, if unsurprising, that those who exhibit anti-social symptoms are not generally much interested in what is happening in the world of politics. Turning back to the WVS, we find that among Wave 6 U.S. respondents who feel that bribe-taking, tax evasion, and the like are sometimes justifiable, 57 percent are either “not very” or “not at all” interested in politics, compared to 35 percent among those who think all these behaviors are never justifiable. This pattern carries over to skeptics of democracy: 69 percent of those who feel that living in a democracy is not particularly important<sup>16</sup> say that they lack an interest in politics, compared to just 28 percent of those who assign democracy the utmost importance. This pattern suggests that just as indifference to democracy is not necessarily a politically motivated attitude, neither in many instances does it reflect a politically engaged perspective.

It would be valuable to probe this dimension of the problem further. Research suggests that low interest in politics and lack of political knowledge go together, and that the young and less educated lag the most in these areas.<sup>17</sup> Although surveys cannot assess much beyond knowledge of basic political facts, it is reasonable to posit that those bereft of factual information may also lack the broader awareness that goes into appreciating the value of democracy and grasping the potential consequences should it fail. This suggests a more speculative conclusion: If survey respondents, especially those who are younger and who have fewer socioeconomic advantages, sometimes dismiss democracy because they do not care much about important social norms, they may also, in many instances, simply not know enough to care. Their indifference to democracy may partly reflect a relatively facile and ill-informed understanding of the political world.

## Politics and Culture

It is helpful to keep two important trends relating to modern democracy separate in our minds and our analysis, unless and until empirical evidence points us toward stronger connections between the two.

One important trend of the past several decades has been rising discontent with government. This is principally a political phenomenon, one that has triggered vigorous responses from activists on both sides of the political divide. Manifestations in recent years include Tea Party enthusiasts shaking up the Republican Party; protesters filling parks and streets during the Occupy Wall Street movement; Bernie Sanders’s supporters boosting him to a surprisingly strong bid for the Democratic Party’s 2016 presidential nomination; and constituents flooding town

hall meetings with members of Congress to oppose the repeal of Obamacare. For the most part, these actions and activists represent the spirited and combative forces that animate and sometimes enlarge democracy. They are no threat to it.

In parallel with this process, however, the past several decades have seen a social and cultural transformation rooted in a generationally led erosion of basic norms and values that connect people to their society and the common good. There has been some intertwining of this generational change with longstanding socioeconomic divisions that leave those at the lower end feeling not just materially deprived, but marginalized and alienated. One of the most important consequences of this cultural shift has been the waning of support for the foundational norms of the democratic system.

By this interpretation, growing disregard for democracy reflects the rise not of dogmatic authoritarianism, but of a broad and amorphous social malaise that blithely rejects a diverse array of social norms, including key tenets of democracy. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to bring people back into democratic politics, but to draw them again into the social contract—into a sense that they belong to a society where core principles essential to living together should rightly be respected and observed. This entails, among other things, countering excessive individualism, ensuring that all have some reasonable opportunity to succeed in life regardless of socioeconomic background, and providing robust civics education to help instill deeper understanding of core democratic principles among all citizens.

This elaboration of the line of research suggested by Foa and Mounk identifies one important reason why democratic norms are currently coming under so much pressure. Other insights should, and surely will be, added as we seek a fuller understanding of this critical development in contemporary democratic politics, not only in the United States but elsewhere as well.

## NOTES

1. Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (July 2016): 5–17, and Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Signs of Deconsolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 28 (January 2017): 5–15.

2. Foa and Mounk's critics say that the erosion in support for democratic norms in the Western democracies is neither as substantial nor as consequential as Foa and Mounk claim. My premise is that, such charges notwithstanding, Foa and Mounk have identified an important (and overlooked) trend that merits further investigation. I also offer supportive evidence for their thesis by linking opinions on democracy to other attitudes and dispositions that show evidence of change over time as well as significant variation across generations.

3. Foa and Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," 6.

4. These four results are cited in the 2016 article on pages 13, 12, 9, and 7–8, respectively.

5. See Figure 1 on page 7 of their 2016 article.
6. Some replies to Foa and Mounk hinge on skepticism about the generation gap in support for democracy. Further investigation of generational effects should consider the higher educational-attainment levels of younger generations (given the strong positive correlation between education and support for democratic norms and values). When education controls are applied, differences between younger and older respondents will tend to widen. I have as yet seen no reply to Foa and Mounk that applies such controls.
7. For example, Susan J. Pharr and Robert D. Putnam, eds., *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
8. Relevant works include Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Russell J. Dalton and Christian Welzel, eds., *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: CQ Press, 2015).
9. This coding approach reflects the position that while these questions offer respondents a ten-point scale to indicate the degree of justifiability that they accord to different actions, it is reasonable and meaningful to treat their responses in a simple binary fashion because the actions in question are matters of principle—and there is thus a qualitative difference between responding 1 (never justifiable) and anything else. In most cases, the bulk of the responses greater than 1 are in the 2 to 5 range.
10. All correlation coefficients reported in this paper are based on simple additive indices using the full range of values for each set of variables (in this case, the three confidence in institutions variables and the four unlawful behavior variables).
11. Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Matthew C. MacWilliams, “Who Decides When the Party Doesn’t? Authoritarian Voters and the Rise of Donald Trump,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 49 (October 2016): 716–21.
12. Only four of the six WVS waves spanning roughly ten-year intervals are used in Figure 3. Results for the 2006 wave are consistent with those shown in the Figure. The 1995 results are anomalous, showing a decrease across all age categories in tolerance of unlawful acts compared to the earlier 1982 and 1990 surveys. Whether this reflects a real shift in public attitudes or is something connected to survey methodology is hard to say. In any event, the other five WVS waves do clearly show tolerance for unlawful acts trending upward consistently over time.
13. Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).
14. Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009).
15. Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015). For data on social trust, see page 220.
16. This group is defined as those in the bottom half of 10-point democracy scale, who choose a value between 1 (democracy is “not at all important”) and 5.
17. The Pew Research Center conducts surveys testing political knowledge from time to time, and consistently finds significant differences by age and level of education. For example, see [www.people-press.org/2007/04/15/public-knowledge-of-current-affairs-little-changed-by-news-and-information-revolutions](http://www.people-press.org/2007/04/15/public-knowledge-of-current-affairs-little-changed-by-news-and-information-revolutions).